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CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRUE MINISTER OF CHRIST

A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE FUNERAL

OF THE

Rev. Joseph Strong, D. D.

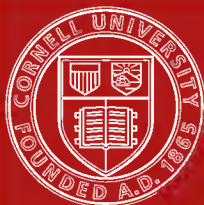
SENIOR PASTOR OF THE FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NORWICH, CONN.

DECEMBER 21, 1834.

BY CORNELIUS B. EVEREST,
Pastor of said Church.

NORWICH:
J. DUNHAM.

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1835.



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SERMON.

2 TIMOTHY, IV. 6, 7, 8.

"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

THE apostle Paul was a distinguished servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Possessed of strong native powers of mind, and a constitutional boldness and ardor, brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law, he was qualified in early life to exert a powerful influence in whatever cause he might engage. With respect to religion he was a rigid Pharisee, and a violent opposer of Christ and his cause. He made havoc of the church, and thought that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. But as he went to Damascus, with authority and commission from the chief priests, he was arrested by the Lord in a miraculous manner, and smitten to the ground. He heard a voice saying unto him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" The arrows of conviction were fastened in his heart. He was renewed by the Holy Spirit. And in the exercise of unconditional submission to God, he inquired, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" And the Lord said unto him, "Rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness, both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness

to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among them which are sanctified, by faith that is in me."

Thus he commenced a new life ; new with respect to principles of action, and object of pursuit. And he subsequently directed all his efforts, in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit, to build up the cause which he had endeavored to destroy. He was raised up to do a great work ; to be a pioneer of the Lord's host to the Gentile nations ; to be a star of the first magnitude in his kingdom. His labors through life were crowned with marked success ; and he prepared the way for rich harvests of souls long after he was at rest in heaven.

When he wrote this Epistle to Timothy, he was in prison at Rome, expecting soon to be put to death. He stood in reality between two worlds, reviewing his past life,—his labors, trials, success, and enjoyment in preaching the gospel ; and looking forward into eternity with unshaken confidence that he should receive in heaven a crown of righteousness. And he stated in few words his own views with respect to his whole ministerial life. "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." He was confident that he had been a devoted, persevering, and successful servant of the Lord Jesus, and was ready to depart, "not in the gentle decay of exhausted nature, not in the weaning languor of a sick bed, not in the calm of a peaceful dissolution, suffering only the pains inseparable from an ordinary death ; but he was ready to meet the hand of violence : he was ready to pour out his blood upon the scaffold ; he was longing to join the souls which were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God."

The apostle has here presented *the prominent characteristics of a true minister of Christ.*

Some perhaps may question the propriety and reasonableness of presenting for general imitation a character so highly gifted, so peculiarly circumstanced as this inspired apostle, this devoted martyr. But the labors of the ministry in every age are to be performed, and its trials sustained in somewhat of the same spirit and temper that he possessed. And the higher his

successors in the ministerial office rise in imitation of his faith, zeal, self-denial, and untiring efforts, the more they advance the cause of truth and righteousness, and commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

That which lies at the foundation of fidelity in a minister of Christ, and which ought here first to be noticed, is *vital piety*. It is by no means the duty of every christian to be a public teacher of religion, but every true minister of Christ is a subject of the *renewing grace of God*. He is a believer, not merely in divine revelation, but in the Lord Jesus Christ. His faith, like that of the apostle Paul, and which he *kept*, is a lively conviction of the power and goodness of God, and of his mercy in Christ Jesus, as revealed in the gospel. It is an animating and pervading principle produced in the heart by the Holy Ghost, spreading and enlarging in its progress, and gathering energy as it proceeds.

It is a characteristic of a true minister of Christ *to preach the word of God in its simplicity and purity*. The charge of the apostle Paul to Timothy, in addition to all his other instructions on the subject, shows that he felt deeply the importance of this trait of character. "Preach the word ; be instant in season, out of season ; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine."

To preach the word of God is to present and inculcate its doctrines, precepts, promises, and threatenings. It is to give a right view of *God* himself, whose perfections are infinite, whose law is holy, just, and good, and whose dominion is an everlasting dominion ; who exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the same in substance, equal in power and glory ; and who by his works of creation, providence, and redemption, will promote his own glory.

It is to give a right view of *man* in his unregenerate state, as dead in trespasses and sins, and justly condemned ; and of the *plan of redemption* formed in the counsels of eternity, and progressively carried into execution in the advent of Christ, in his atoning sacrifice, in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, in the repentance, faith, and obedience of sinners resulting from the energies of divine grace on the heart, in the institutions of the

gospel, in the perseverance of believers, and in the results of the last great day.

A true minister of Christ realizes that his warrant from heaven is, "Thus saith the Lord." No worldly policy in withholding or mutilating the message of God will alter its nature ; for truth and error, light and darkness, life and death, are unchangeable. But God has proclaimed his own name, written his own law, proposed his own terms of salvation, and spread out before us, in all the vividness of truth, the realities of eternity ; and it is the preacher's duty, as an ambassador to guilty men, to deliver the message just as it is recorded on the sacred page. Besides, nothing is so convincing to the human mind, nor so powerful and salutary in its influence on the heart and life, as plain scriptural truth.

It is worthy of remark, however, that a minister of Christ feels it to be important to adapt his instructions to the capacities and wants of his hearers. There is doubtless a difference in congregations with respect to intellectual attainments, habits of thought, tastes of mind, and a variety of external circumstances. There are also different characters in the same congregation, the penitent and impenitent, the moral and immoral, the awakened and careless, the prosperous and afflicted, the old and young ; and although the word of God should be preached in its simplicity and purity, there should be an appropriateness of instruction that each one may have his portion in due season.

It is a characteristic of a true minister of Christ to preach with *earnestness, solemnity, and affection*. "Now then," says the apostle Paul, "we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us ; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." On what subjects in the universe should a man be in earnest, if not on concerns of eternal moment ? Who would entrust his property, much less his *life*, in the hands of an advocate at the bar that would enter upon the cause with no apparent zeal and interest ? But this is indeed a case of life and death. It respects both body and soul forever. Good men are somewhat different in their constitutional temperament, and in their modes of thinking, speaking,

and acting ; and they may have different degrees of grace. But under a solemn sense of his own responsibility, of the duty and danger of the impenitent, and of the nearness of eternity, a true minister of Christ will have his *heart* in the work, and, in a greater or less degree, preach as a dying man to dying men.

In doing this, will he not be *solemn* ? Every consideration derived from the character of his divine Lord and Master, from the nature of the message that he is required to deliver, and from the future world where he must soon meet his hearers, attaches deep interest to his work and throws an air of solemnity around the sacred desk.

And does he not *love* the souls of his fellow-men ? Does he not labor for their salvation ? Though he must inculcate truths which exalt God and abase the sinner, and point out the danger and duty of unbelievers, he will feel the importance of doing it with that kindness and affection which, under God, is best calculated to accomplish the desired object.

A true minister of Christ is influenced in the discharge of his duties by a consideration of *the grace of God which he has received, and of the solemnity of his ordination vows.*

Does he ask, Why was my attention arrested, my conscience convicted, my soul renewed, my guilt forgiven ? His mind is furnished with an answer : “ **By the grace of God I am what I am.** ” But it was not enough that he indulged hope of salvation. He felt for his fellow-men, and ardently desired to be engaged through life in the work of the ministry. He prayed for divine direction, consulted the word of God, watched the leadings of Divine Providence, and cherished the influences of the Holy Spirit. His path was made plain. He was led from step to step until his hopes were realized ; and he felt an obligation to go forward, and do all in his power in the Redeemer’s cause. The day of his public consecration to the work of the ministry arrived. It was a solemn day to his soul. Before God, and angels, and men, he renewedly vowed allegiance to the throne of heaven, took the charge of immortal souls, and entered a field that he must cultivate in view of eternity. He now feels that he belongs wholly and emphatically

to Christ, and that he should indulge himself in no hesitancy, no misgivings of heart. Influenced by these solemn considerations, he desires, in all his future ministry, to be faithful to his divine Lord.

“Would I describe a preacher, such as Paul,
Were he on earth, would hear, approve, and own,
Paul should himself direct me. I would trace
His master-strokes, and draw from his design.
I would express him simple, grave, sincere ;
In doctrine uncorrupt ; in language plain,
And plain in manner ; decent, solemn, chaste,
And natural in gesture ; much impressed
Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
May feel it too ; affectionate in look,
And tender in address, as well becomes
A messenger of grace to guilty men.”

It is characteristic of a true minister of Christ *to be laborious in his great and important work*. The example and instructions of the apostle Paul, on this branch of the subject, present it in a very interesting point of light. “Ye know—after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears and temptations which befel me by the lying in wait of the Jews ; and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house ; testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Meditate upon these things ; give thyself wholly to them ; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine : continue in them ; for in doing this, thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” “But thou, O man of God, flee these things ; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.” “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.”

The life of a faithful minister of Christ is indeed a *laborious*

one. Christ owns him—soul, body, talents, time, and influence, and requires him to devote them all to his appropriate work. It is not to be supposed however that a minister ought not to allow himself time for occasional relaxation and exercise. The preservation of his health, and the continuance of his usefulness, require it. Nor is it claimed that he is a *perfect* man, in the highest sense of the term. But he makes his sacred work the great object of his labors. Nor can he expect to satisfy fully all the people of his charge, however devoted he may be to their spiritual interests. Many think that it is easy work to discharge the duties of the ministry;—but O, what an abundance of labor is requisite, what deep solicitude and unremitted diligence, which exhaust the strength, drink up the spirits, and prey upon the very life of the consecrated servant of Jesus.

A true minister of Christ *aims at the glory of God, in the salvation of souls.* This is his great object, which infinitely exceeds every other—which occupies his mind, enlists his feelings, and calls forth his energies. Losing sight of himself in a great measure, he keeps God and eternity in view, and labors for the conversion of sinners, and the edification and enlargement of the church. It has been well remarked, by a distinguished writer, that the “perfection of christian character does not so much consist in this excellence, or that talent, or the other virtue—in the performance of some right action, or the abstinence from some wrong one, as in *the determination of the whole soul for God.*”

It is not meant that a minister of Christ has no regard to his own character and welfare. He looks well to the state of his own soul, sacredly regards his character that he may have a good report of them that are without, and studies to shew himself approved of God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. In all this, he regards his usefulness, no less than his enjoyment in his Master's work. Though all do not obey the truth, however plainly, affectionately, and faithfully delivered, to some it is a savor of life unto life. And who can estimate the extent of the bless-

sing in such a case? How enraptured will be a minister of Christ to meet in heaven those who were converted to God by his instrumentality ; and to hear the benediction, " Well done, good and faithful servant ; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

In the *dying* experience of the true ministers of Christ, there is unquestionably a difference. And it may arise, in some measure, from external causes, the peculiar structure of the mind, the nature of the disease, and the influence of medicine ; as well as from different degrees of grace. Some may die in less apparent triumph than others, and yet give evidence entirely satisfactory to survivors, that they were in readiness to depart. But few, at the close of life are favored with that high degree of confidence, and joy with which the Apostle Paul looked into eternity. But few with the pious Payson can say, " The celestial city is full in my view. Its glories beam upon me, its odours are wafted to me, its sounds strike upon my ears, its spirit is breathed into my heart."

A true minister of Christ however has good hope through grace. He has something of heaven in his soul. Looking back upon his past life, he is conscious of many imperfections of character, of many deficiencies in duty. All his success in preaching the gospel, he ascribes to God ; all his hope of salvation is in his mercy through Christ. And, having fought a good fight, and kept the faith, he firmly hopes to receive in heaven a crown of righteousness.

The subject naturally leads our minds to a consideration of the character of our beloved friend and venerated father, whose remains we have just deposited in the silent grave.

The Reverend Joseph Strong was a son of a respectable clergyman in Coventry, Connecticut, and was born Sept. 21, 1753. Possessing strong powers of mind, and enjoying superior advantages for an early and thorough education, in connection with the influence of pious example, he became prepared while young for distinguished usefulness in subsequent life. He graduated at Yale College in 1772. Previous to that period he had become a hopeful subject of the renewing grace of God, and a member of his visible church. Having completed his academical course at an early age, he returned to

College in compliance with the advice of his father, and, as a resident graduate, reviewed most of his former studies. He next made suitable preparation for the ministry, and became a preacher of the gospel. In the course of Divine Providence he was led to Norwich, and was ordained over this church and society March 18th, 1778, on which occasion, the ordination sermon was preached by his brother, the late Dr. Strong of Hartford, and the charge given by his father, the pastor of the church in Coventry.

To a disposition uncommonly amiable, was united a heart always alive to the wants, the comfort, the interest, and the happiness of others. Amid the various duties, changes, and trials of life, his feelings were admirably regulated by the precepts of the gospel. He was a devoted husband, an affectionate parent, a kind neighbor, and a good citizen.

As a scholar, he stood deservedly high. His mind was acute and discriminating, and his memory uncommonly retentive. With respect to literary acquirements, classical taste, and a sound judgment, but few have been his superiors. These are traits of character of no small importance in the great work of the christian ministry, and which he retained to the very close of life.

In addition to all his other qualities, he possessed, in no small degree, those prominent characteristics of a true minister of Christ that we have been considering. He was evidently a *renewed* man. His piety was built on christian principles.—To the declarations of the Bible, he gave implicit confidence. He firmly believed what are called by way of distinction, *the doctrines of grace*, and cordially approved of them. He knew God. He was experimentally acquainted with the truth as it is in Jesus. The Redeemer was precious to him as his divine Instructor, atoning Sacrifice, and rightful Lord. Of all this, he has given evidence by a life devoted to the service of God, and regulated by the precepts of the gospel. He was reserved, except with his intimate friends, as to his own religious exercises; and adverse to all ostentation and display. There was nothing boisterous in his religion, nothing transient. It seemed inwrought into the very temper of his soul, and exhibited itself,

not as a passionate excitement, but as a steady, active, holy principle.

This departed servant of Christ preached the word of God, it is believed, in its simplicity and purity. His sermons were *doctrinal* and *practical*, presenting in due connection the grace of God, and the necessity of human agency,—the deep depravity of sinners, and the duty of immediate repentance, faith, and obedience,—the terrors of the law, and the consolations of the gospel. He preached *Christ and him crucified*, and showed, in connection with the claims of the gospel and the retributions of eternity, that the test of the genuineness of a Christian profession is a holy life. His sermons were always written with care. His positions were supported by scriptural argument. The subject was methodically arranged, admirably condensed, clearly illustrated, and forcibly applied. His object was rather to enlighten the understanding than to address the passions, that his hearers, under the influence of truth, might know their own hearts and the method of salvation, and unconditionally submit to God. He earnestly desired that all who publicly professed the Christian religion might do it *understandingly*, as necessary to the preservation of the peace and purity of the church.

In preaching the word of God he was simple, grave, sincere. He was earnest, solemn, and affectionate, evincing to all who heard him that he felt deeply the importance of the message which he delivered, and anxious that they should feel it too. He felt a weight of obligation pressing upon him to be faithful, as he contemplated the grace of God which he had experienced, and the solemn vows which he had taken upon himself in his public consecration to the work of the ministry, as he looked upon the people of his charge, and extended his thoughts onward to the judgment.

Having enjoyed more than an ordinary share of health, he lost by being detained from public worship only a very few Sabbaths during his ministry. He was devoted to the interests of his people. He preached a great many sermons, and performed a great amount of parochial and other ministerial labor.

In his addresses to the throne of grace, whether in the pulpit, the lecture-room, or the private dwelling, he was peculiar-

ly solemn, fervent, and appropriate. He showed that his heart was right with God ; that he had a deep sense of the greatness of the Being whom he addressed, of the wants of himself and others for whom he plead, and of the preciousness of Christ in whose name he approached the Father.

In parochial labors and concerns he evinced sound judgment and christian prudence, in connection with that independence of mind which is ever suitable to a minister of Christ. And we doubt not, that his great object in the work of the ministry was to promote the glory of God in the salvation of souls. His labors were not without success. In his Half Century Sermon, he has made the following statement : “ I do not recollect a single year of my ministry, without some instances of awakening and conversion. ‘ In the shaking of the olive-tree, two or three berries have been found in the top of the uppermost bough ; four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof.’ At three seasons, more especially, sanguine hopes were excited that the Lord was about to work wonders on our behalf. But though painful disappointment, to a degree, formed out the result, still it will be remembered with gratitude with regard to each of them, that it proved the occasion of very considerable increase to the church.”

Not long after that sermon was delivered, he was permitted to witness, in connection with the present pastor, a still more interesting revival, as the fruits of which more than one hundred united with the visible church of God. He was indeed a sincere and cordial friend of revivals of religion.

He was a member of the Corporation of Yale College eighteen years, and performed the duties of that responsible station with discretion and fidelity. His mind took a comprehensive view of the whole subject that was presented to him. He was an accurate observer of men and things ; a prudent and wise counsellor. He received from the college in New Jersey the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity.

Dr. Strong has been one of the lights that have shone in the Christian church. Divine Providence has made him, during a long life, an able and faithful minister of the gospel, and an instrument of advancing the cause of the Redeemer in the world.

It is here worthy of remark, that the period from the ordination of Dr. Lord to the death of Dr. Strong was 117 years. It is indeed a fact of rare occurrence that two men, without mentioning the period of joint labor, should occupy a station so long, or that a church in this changing world should not be destitute of a settled pastor a single moment during so long a period. As our departed friend said with reference to *his* predecessor, so your present pastor can say with reference to *him*, both as to cordiality and length of time: "It is one of the most pleasing recollections of my past life, that I was permitted to serve with him in the gospel, *as a son with a father*, almost six years."

During this period, entire friendship and cordiality have existed between us. Nothing has transpired to mar our mutual enjoyment. The speaker has endeavored to profit by this aged father's experience, and to make the evening of his life pleasant; while *he*, I doubt not, has equally labored to promote the usefulness of his colleague.

The last time that he met with us in the house of God was on the first Sabbath in January, 1833, when he took part in the administration of the Lord's Supper. His prayers and exhortations, flowing from the fullness of his soul, and pronounced with trembling lips, led us to feel that it might be, as he said, the last time that he should meet us at the sacramental board. As a patriarch, he commended us to God, and took his leave. From that period to his death he has continued as before, humble and devout, patient and resigned under infirmities and trials, firm in his attachment to Christ, and happy in God. The close of his life, calm and bright, was like the setting of a summer's sun.

Thus he died on the 18th of December, 1834, in the 82d year of his age, and the 57th of his ministry; leaving a wife and three children, a numerous circle of relatives and friends, a beloved church and congregation, to mourn his departure. "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth; yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them."

To the bereaved family and relatives, I am happy to impart all the consolation in my power. I know, my friends, that you weep and mourn. But few are as highly favored in life as you have been—the widow with a husband, and the children with a parent so kind and affectionate, so wise and faithful, presenting through life an example of unaffected politeness, of manly virtue, of evangelical piety. The more and greater were his excellences, the greater is your loss. But be truly thankful that he has been to you so rich a blessing, and spared so long. Realize that the Lord does all things right; that though clouds and darkness are round about him, justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne. You may not sorrow even as others which have no hope; for if you believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. That endeared form, though deposited in the grave, is not forever lost. He who is “the resurrection and the life” hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Your friend will rise incorruptible and immortal, and wear in heaven a crown of righteousness forever.

May the widow’s heart enjoy the consolations of God, which are neither few nor small. Casting her burdens upon the Lord, may she be sustained by his arm of strength, and be enabled by victorious grace to say, “It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good.”

May the children have grace to become wise unto salvation. May the Lord be their friend and everlasting portion. May they be cheered by his presence, protected by his arm, and taken at last to heaven.

Brethren and friends of this church and congregation! your former pastor, who has long stood on these walls of Zion, and proclaimed the unsearchable riches of Christ, who felt that your interests were his own, whose counsels and sympathies you have enjoyed in the house of God and in your own dwellings, has closed his labors. He has gone to unite with patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, in the employments of heaven; he has gone to unite with him who was his predecessor and venerable colleague in the ministry, and with those of his own

dear flock whom the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls had removed before him. But in what condition has he left you? Some are members of the visible church of God. With you he has often communed at the Lord's table. He has counseled you. He has wept and rejoiced with you. And though dead, he yet speaketh. He calls upon you to be in readiness to follow him into the eternal world; to be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

But it cannot in truth be said, that all who have set under his ministry are truly pious. Some have rejected the message which he delivered, and despised the goodness and forbearance of God. O what an account you must render at the last day, when you meet him at the judgment-seat of Christ? Unless you become reconciled to God before you die, inevitable ruin awaits you.

In addressing this church and people, I am constrained to add that I feel a heavy load of affliction pressing upon me. I have lost a father in the ministry, an intimate friend, my venerable colleague. "My father! my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horseman thereof."

Fathers and brethren in the ministry! This subject is one of no ordinary importance to us. And the Providence of God, in connection with it, speaks in deep, impressive tones. Are we faithful to declare the whole counsel of God and in the spirit and manner which he requires? Do we copy the great apostle Paul, as he copied Christ, realizing that our responsibility is high, that our time is short, that we must meet our hearers at the bar of God? While few indeed are permitted to remain as long as our departed friend in the field of labor, many are cut down in the midst of their usefulness, and removed from the church and the world. It becomes us to keep our hearts with all diligence, and count not our lives dear to us, so that we may finish our course with joy, and the ministry which we have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. Motives, awful as eternity, urge us to be faithful. O, may we be approved and accepted at last, as *true ministers of Jesus!*